

THE 1986 CENSUS: A PORTRAIT OF AUSTRALIA

Introduction

The eleventh Census of Population and Housing was held on 30 June 1986 and involved contact with every household in Australia. The information derived from questions on the census form will provide a statistical portrait of the Australian population and the dwellings in which they live. The population census provides accurate counts which give a base for regular population estimates made for each State and each local government area. These estimates are required for the determination of the number of representatives in the Commonwealth Parliament and the allocation of federal funds to each State and local government authority. Census statistics are also used extensively by government bodies for policy formulation and administration at the federal, State and local level. Other users include welfare and social organisations, business organisations, research institutions and individuals.

Selection of topics

Experience in Australia and other countries in recent years indicates the critical importance of having public co-operation when conducting a census. Recognising the high level of public interest, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) once again undertook an extensive program of topic selection and question development for the 1986 Census. The 1986 topic development program took place during 1983 and 1984. Known users of census data were invited to submit possible topics, while advertisements were placed in newspapers inviting public submissions. Approximately 3000 submissions were received, of which 900 requested 100 new topics. Each topic was assessed according to its importance and suitability to a census format. The assessment was supported by field testing of possible new questions and questions on difficult or sensitive topics.

Particular effort was made in developing the question on ethnicity. In 1982 the Population Census Ethnicity Committee was established, under the chairmanship of Professor Borrie, to consider the requirements for census data on the ethnic background of the population. The committee took into account overseas experience and the views of users. A number of possible questions were tested by the ABS. The Committee's recommendations, which included a question on ancestry, were published by the ABS (*The Measurement of Ethnicity in the Australian Census of Population and Housing*, Cat. No. 2172.0) and released for public consideration.

Recommendations on other census topics were also published by the ABS. Following further discussions with users, suggested census questions for all topics were considered by the Australian Statistics Advisory Council prior to Government consideration. In approving the content of the 1986 Census, the Government sought to obtain a balance between the needs of users for data, the need to elicit accurate and consistent answers and the need to avoid placing too great a burden on the public.

The 1986 Census Form

The 1986 Census Household Form contained 40 questions, of which 34 related to personal characteristics and six to dwelling characteristics. Of these questions, 38 were answered by householders (requiring up to 46 responses), and two questions were answered by the collector. This form was distributed to all private dwellings and caravan parks prior to Census Night. All persons not in private dwellings on Census Night received a Personal Form which contained only the questions on personal characteristics. Questions on demographic topics (sex, age, marital status, relationship and fertility) and ethnicity topics (birthplace, ancestry, language, citizenship and year of arrival) constituted half of the personal questions. The remaining personal questions concerned education, income, usual residence and internal migration, religion, and employment status and labour force activity. The six dwelling questions concerned the number of bedrooms and motor vehicles, rent and mortgage details, persons temporarily absent from the dwelling, dwelling structure and whether the dwelling was occupied. The latter two questions were completed by census collectors.

For the first time, questions on each person's ancestry and language other than English spoken at home were included. This will greatly improve census data collected on the ethnic

composition of the Australian population. Census family data will also be improved. The new question on usual residents temporarily absent will correct an over-statement of the number of single parent families. Over-statements previously occurred where the spouse was away from the household over census night. Also, the question on relationship was altered to provide statistics on de facto living arrangements and children in blended families. Further important changes were an additional question on attendance at an educational institution and the deletion of the question on the material of outer walls of dwellings. The latter question is no longer considered a satisfactory indicator of housing conditions.

Publicity

Public understanding and acceptance of the census is essential if statistics of a high quality are to be produced. For this reason, a public awareness campaign was conducted prior to the 1981 and 1986 Censuses. Research carried out before and after the 1981 Census showed that the public were more favourably disposed to the population census as a result of the publicity campaign. An increase in the quality of response was achieved in 1981. The number of persons missed in the census (under-enumeration) fell, as did the number of persons failing to answer particular questions (non-response). The aims of the 1986 campaign were to inform the public about the uses made of census information, to assist those who experience difficulty in completing the form, where to obtain assistance, and to explain the measures undertaken to ensure the confidentiality of the information provided. A census form and a separate booklet explaining the Census were delivered together to each household. Persons with questions had access to a telephone inquiry service, whilst a multi-language leaflet included in every booklet referred persons with difficulty in understanding English to the census telephone interpreter service. Census collectors were trained to assist persons to complete the form. In areas of sizeable ethnic communities, collectors proficient in a foreign language were employed. These procedures were supplemented by an extensive media campaign which included advertising on radio and television and in newspapers, including non-English language papers.

Aboriginal Enumeration

The ABS has given considerable attention in the last four censuses to obtaining accurate statistics on the Aboriginal population. There is a strong demand for this information, particularly to aid the planning and funding of federal government programs. Special procedures were designed to gain the confidence and support of Aborigines. Additional staff were employed to increase the level of contact between Aboriginal communities and the ABS. Aboriginal collectors were employed in areas with a high Aboriginal population.

Conduct of the Census

As in previous Australian censuses, the 1986 Census was self-enumerating whereby forms were distributed to, and collected from, the public over a three week period. This operation involved extensive planning and employment of a large number of people on a short-term basis. Valuable assistance was provided by staff of the Australian Electoral Commission who were responsible for the recruitment, training and general supervision of temporary census staff. The Division of National Mapping assisted in updating maps required for the distribution of census forms. Approximately 38,000 temporary staff were employed to distribute and collect census forms. Generally, each collector delivered forms to each occupied dwelling in their collection district. The size of these districts varied greatly, from less than one hectare to over 33,000 square kilometres. A small number of collectors were responsible for people in transit, such as those on trains, buses and aircraft. Approximately 11.2 million household and personal forms were distributed to field staff around Australia.

Despite the diligence of collectors, it is inevitable that some persons are missed on Census Night. Since the 1966 Census an attempt has been made to estimate this under-enumeration. During the third and fourth weeks after Census Night, a sample of about 40,000 households across Australia were interviewed to determine whether the members of the household had been included on a census form. The results of this survey (known as the Post-Enumeration Survey) supplemented by demographic analysis and estimates of the number of residents temporarily overseas on Census Night, are used to adjust the census population count on a usual residence basis to provide the estimated resident population of Australia at census date. Processing of 1986 census forms is being undertaken at the Census Data Transcription Centre in Sydney. This involves the checking and coding of answers on forms and the recording of coded information on computer files. Names and addresses will not be entered on to the

computer files. After processing, all household and personal forms are destroyed to ensure that personal information cannot be revealed. The processing of approximately 5-6 million completed household and personal forms will take nearly a year.

Census Results

Census counts based on where people were on Census Night will be released progressively from February 1987, commencing with data for the Australian Capital Territory, then the Northern Territory followed by the States in order of population size. Further data releases will be in the form of statistical publications, microfiche and magnetic tape. There will be considerable flexibility for users to obtain census statistics on specific topics for a variety of geographical areas. Results based on place of enumeration will be available for areas such as collection districts, statistical local areas, urban centres/localities, statistical divisions, postcodes and electoral divisions. Results based on place of usual residence will be released much later in 1987, and will be available only for statistical local areas, or aggregations of those areas. In addition, magnetic tape files containing samples of unidentifiable persons in households will be released.

The ABS will also release a number of information papers on census topics, general information on the census, details of data release and the Catalogue of 1986 Census Tables (Cat. No. 2175.0) which will list all standard tables to be released. Information on the census, as well as census results, will be available from ABS offices in each capital city.